Charades at Versailles: Poland and the Ukraine at the Paris Peace Conferences

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A conference can create a framework that usefully limits discussions that might otherwise range more widely. This chapter will address the relevant events leading up to the peace conferences; the positions of Poland and the Ukraine during the conference; and the treaties' and conventions' significance in the later history of the two countries.
A brief look at the immediate background to the negotiations will serve to explain the composition of the Polish delegation and its internal conflicts, and the situation of the Ukrainian representatives.

Preconditions and Background

Those sitting around the negotiating tables in Paris included an official delegation from the very newly established Republic of Poland. Also present were representatives of the various strands of the Ukrainian independence movement, all striving to win sovereignty for their country.[1]
The new states in East-Central Europe, set up as a result of negotiations and agreed treaties, feature in many accounts of the European situation following the end of WWI According to these accounts, the victorious Entente powers were the ones to decide and dictate these negotiations and treaties. This, however, presents only one side of the real story.
It is true that the Polish representatives, and to a greater extent the Ukrainians, exerted very limited influence on the course and outcomes of the Paris peace conferences. The victorious Entente powers – the USA, Great Britain and France – were far more influential. Together with Italy, which had aligned itself to the winning side, they constituted the negotiating side of the 'Big Four'.
In historiographical literature, the term 'Versailles' has come to designate a multiplicity of separate conferences, of meetings of committees and sub-committees, held in a variety of Parisian suburbs. The 'Versailles Treaty' itself was signed in June 1919 in the Palace of Versailles, and it was followed by a succession of subsidiary treaties and accords, which in the case of Poland and the Ukraine were not concluded until 1923. The politicians, advisers and specialists taking part in the various stages of conferences held in the Parisian suburbs took up various positions over the course of the negotiations, in part because the negotiators found the ethnic and territorial situation in Eastern Europe confusing. The talks' final outcomes reflect this confusion.
Poland's re-emergence as a state of considerable political and economic importance was in significant ways an act of self-liberation. The sovereign state of Poland was founded during November and December 1918, and the Entente powers subsequently largely accepted the propositions its representatives put forward.
Those campaigning for the Ukraine's independence were less successful. They were let down by their weak and divided front, and frustrated by the Entente policy to prioritise accommodation with Soviet Russia.

The Rebirth of Poland

The choice of France and Paris to host the conference held particular significance for Poland. France had become a popular destination for Polish emigrants during the more than 130 years following the Partition of Poland. As each insurrection in Poland against the Partition was in its turn put down, a new wave of emigrants flowed towards Western Europe and France. In 1917, a Polish National Committee was set up in Paris under Roman Dmowski (1864-1939) to

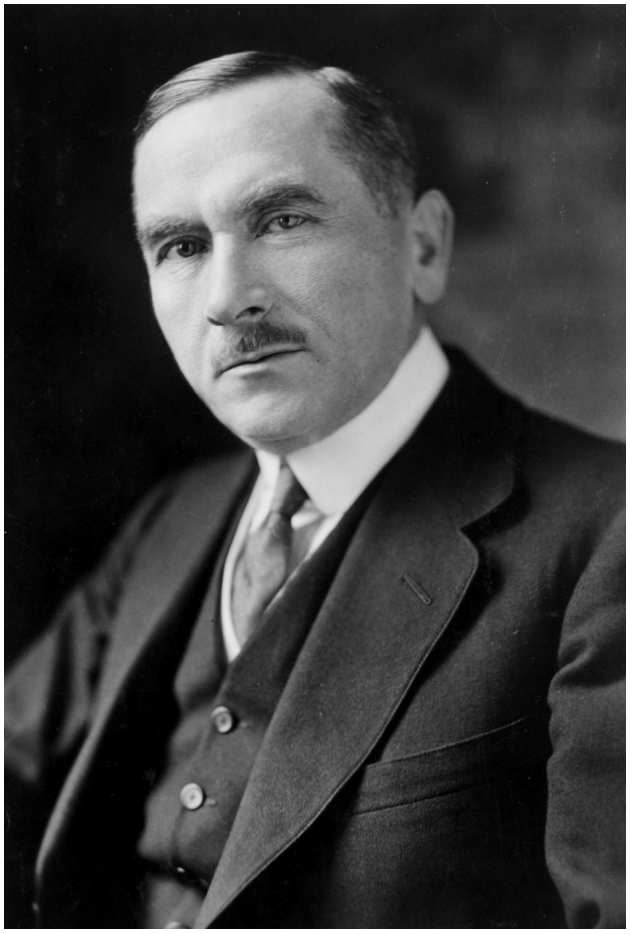


Fig.1: The Polish politician Roman Dmowski.

represent the interests of parties and groups of exiles with right-wing conservative and nationalist views. As Germany headed towards defeat and preparations for the Paris conferences were underway, Dmowski was working towards being acknowledged as Poland's official representative. He based his claim on significant support from various Polish Partition territories and an army established in France, which consisted of Polish prisoners of war and volunteers under the command of General Józef Haller (1873-1960). As the leader of the Polish National Democrats (ND),[2] he was recognised in many West European capitals, and he benefited from a multitude of international diplomatic and political contacts.[3]

His most important Polish adversary, Józef Piłsudski (1867-1935), derived his authority from having a leading member of the influential Socialist Party (PPS) for many years.[4] He had commanded the Polish legion, founded in August 1914, and from August 1917 to November 1918 he had been interned in Magdeburg Castle for refusing to take the oath to the German Emperor.

He returned to Warsaw on 10 November and became the most important politician and military leader at the time of the founding of the new Polish state.

The names of Roman Dmowski and Józef Piłsudski stood for the two camps fighting for Polish independence at the time of the founding and early development of the Second Polish Republic. Piłsudski and his adherents, who included Socialists, Liberals and Conservatives as well, campaigned for a sovereign, multinational and multiconfessional democratic Polish Republic. Their idea was for it to be allied with its eastern neighbours, independent Ukraine, Lithuania and Belarus, in a federation inspired by the tradition of the Polish-Lithuanian Aristocratic Republic. How the federation, confederation or alliance of independent states was to be shaped, and the territorial claims involved, was to be settled in a process of negotiation and conciliation. The same method was later used to decide on the borders. Piłsudski's very varied group of adherents and supporters shared a sense of patriotism that was free of chauvinism and xenophobia, and they were ready and willing to respect the political mentality of other nations. They were also open to shaping a partnership of equality with neighbouring nations that were not prepared to engage fully in a federation.[5]

Roman Dmowski represented a significant – albeit splintered – spectrum of right-wing conservative and nationalist groupings, and he aimed to create a fundamentally ethnic Polish, traditional and Catholic Poland, in which national and confessional minorities would be tolerated but not given equal rights. He questioned the existence of an independent Ukrainian nation, and considered the Ukrainians and Belarusians to be an ethnic group incapable of establishing their own state. He held similar views of the Lithuanians. And unlike Piłsudski, Dmowski was not opposed to an alliance with Russia to counterbalance Poland's ancient enemy, Germany.

In order to succeed in getting Polish demands met at the Paris conferences, Piłsudski and Dmowski had to find a compromise position. Before the two sides – the group in Warsaw and the representatives of the

Polish National Committee in Paris – were able to do this, events were set in motion in Berlin that would bring the founder of the Polish state to the capital of Poland.

The wave of revolution reached Berlin on 9 November 1918. Only a few weeks earlier, Max von Baden (1867-1929) had been appointed German Chancellor, announced the abdication of the Emperor and appointed the leader of the majority Social Democrats, Friedrich Ebert (1871-1925), as acting head of state. In the early afternoon, his fellow party member Philipp Scheidemann (1865-1939) announced the founding of the German Republic from a Reichstag balcony. Two hours later, from a balcony of the City Palace in Berlin, Karl Liebknecht (1871-1919) announced the birth of the Free Socialist Soviet Republic.

Emperor Wilhelm II (1859-1941) had been in his headquarters in Spa, Belgium, since the end of October 1918, nursing a variety of adventurous ambitions. On one day he would plan to hurry to the front in order to die a hero's death amidst his troops, and on the next, to march with steadfast and loyal regiments on Berlin in order to overcome the mutineers. In the end, it was only the earnest entreaties of his entourage, both military and civilian, that persuaded him to accept abdication and exile in the Netherlands.

In Warsaw and Poland, the German occupation soldiers, over 30,000 strong, had been affected by the unrest for several weeks. News from Germany and Russia was reaching the country from outside, and internally there were difficult relationships and uncertainties about supplies – combined, these lead to strikes, looting and attacks. General Hartwig von Beseler (1850-1921), commanding the German forces in Warsaw, was in frequent and anxious contact with Berlin and knew that he would not be able to control the situation for much longer. The three members of the Polish regency council, a German-led pseudo-government, kept encouraging him to summon to Warsaw the one man who could prevent a conflagration.

The Berlin authorities therefore resorted to calling upon the diplomat Count Harry Kessler (1868-1937), who had known Piłsudski when he commanded the legions on the Volhynian front. He was to fetch the commandant, with his adjutant and fellow prisoner Kazimierz Sosnkowski (1885-1969), out of prison

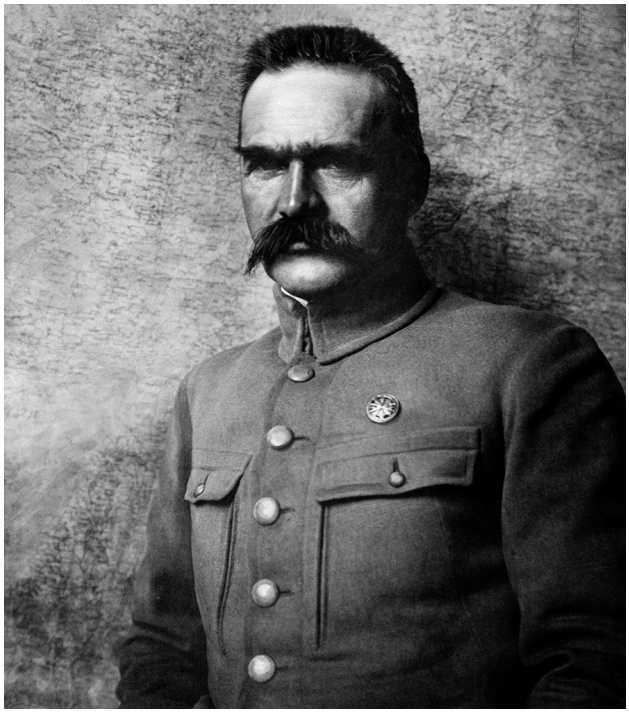


Fig. 2: The Polish statesman Józef Piłsudski, Chief of State 1918-1922, de facto leader of the Second Polish Republic as the Minister of Military Affairs 1926-1935.

and convey them to Warsaw as quickly as possible. Piłsudski was to serve as a member of the regency council to help stabilise the situation until the Berlin disturbances had subsided.

Piłsudski was of course keen to regain his freedom, but not to carry out the task for which he had been designated. Fully aware that the Germans were relying on him, he refused every call on his loyalty, both in Magdeburg and Berlin. Unlike Dmowski, he was prepared to compromise with Germany because he saw Russia as the principal threat to Poland. However, he was not prepared for Poland to continue as a mere satellite state.

Count Kessler returned to the Magdeburg prison on 8 November 1918 to fetch the commandant and Sosnkowski and take them on a lively car trip to Berlin.[6]

On the evening of 9 November, at the general headquarters in Spa, the Emperor's royal train was assembled, and Wilhelm II crossed the border into the Netherlands aboard it the next morning. A significantly smaller special train had been made ready in

Berlin, and it conveyed Piłsudski and Sosnkowski to Warsaw on the morning of 10 November.

The overnight journey gave Piłsudski the opportunity to reflect on his time in prison and on developments since July 1917. Magdeburg was not the first place he had visited during his brief eighteen-month imprisonment. The only accusation against him was his refusal to take the oath; he had therefore been given privileged treatment, being moved from prison to prison before his arrival in Magdeburg in August 1917. His conditions there were tolerable, but he lived in isolation and lodged in a special building on prison grounds, where the German press was his only source of information on the war's progress.

His post was censored and reached him several weeks late. He knew that time was on his side, so he waited out his months in Magdeburg stoically, read and wrote a lot and played many games of patience, one of his favourite activities. He celebrated his 50th birthday in Magdeburg on 5 December 1917 and – many weeks late – received news of the birth of his daughter Wanda in February 1918.

As the special train crossed the Polish border in the night and stopped briefly at a small station, music began to play on the platform. A blind violinist was playing a tune that immediately arrested the attention of the two travellers. The legionnaires' song 'Wir, die erste Brigade' ('We, the First Brigade') had become popular. It could not, however, have been a coincidence that they were hearing it just at that moment.

When the train arrived in Warsaw the commandant and his companion were welcomed by various groups waiting on the platform, though without any great celebrations or speeches. During the preceding evening and night, news of Piłsudski's arrival had reached key members among the circle of the military Secret Legion Organisation (POW),[7] the leaders of the Socialist Party and the members of the regency council. It was these people who were waiting on the platform. Piłsudski met each of the delegations during the course of 10 November to conduct initial discussions. They established the key elements necessary to the founding of the Polish state. These steps were vital preparation for the Polish negotiating position at the Paris conference table.

The members of the regency council, initially somewhat hesitant, were keen to include Piłsudski as a fourth member of the council, but he made it clear that he did not want such a role. He was not interested, he told them, in becoming a dictator, but he needed to have full executive military and civil power. If Poland was to have any hope of becoming a state and surviving as such, it was essential that an army be established in the shortest possible order.

The first steps were to proclaim the Polish Republic, to constitute a provisional government made up of representatives of the various parties and to take measures to ensure public order. In order to achieve this, Piłsudski could call on the POW forces and members of the administration established by the regency council, as well as on specialised personnel from the various Partition territories. The POW's influence extended into the soldiers' councils of the German garrison, which was to be disarmed and escorted back to Germany.[8]

Piłsudski exerted pressure on his socialist companions, who had already established a provisional government, to accept political compromises and a coalition government. The reborn Poland had no scope for extreme socialist demands. He announced that he stood for the whole nation, not just for a particular political camp. Conservatives and the right wing had never submitted to socialist dominance, and the left wing included Soviet socialist groups keen to join forces with Vladimir I. Lenin (1870-1924) and the Bolsheviks. Poland was not yet even fully reestablished and it was already under threat of being torn apart by civil war.

It was important to develop an initial political compromise so that public order could be secured, and preparations could be made for elections and a process to establish a constitution. This was the only way to ensure that the victor nations would accept the idea of a Polish Republic and recognise the authority of the Polish delegation at the forthcoming peace negotiations.

Incredibly, they managed it. The Germans, however, were forced to abandon any hope that their pseudo-state would survive, and not long afterwards they were engulfed in the political wrangling that led to the establishment of the Weimar Republic.

In order to save the republic, Friedrich Ebert and other Social Democrats joined forces with members of Imperial Army and were able to put down the Spartacist uprising in January 1919. All were keen to

Fig. 3: Józef Piłsudski, and Prime Minister Ignacy Paderewski arriving at the opening of the Polish Parliament, Warsaw, January 1919.

challenge the existence of the barely-created Polish state, which they denounced as a historic monstrosity and challenged in every way possible.

Lenin and the Bolsheviks were fighting to maintain the power they had but recently gained; they saw the Ukraine as an integral part of Russian sovereign territory, and were very anxious to see the establishment of a dependent Soviet Polish state. These plans, too, were frustrated.

Fighting broke out in early November 1918, threatening any potential conciliation between Poland and the Ukraine. In Lwów, military forces of the West Ukrainian People's Republic, proclaimed on 1 November, together with Ukrainian militias sought to gain control of the city and met with resistance. Those resisting were the city's inhabitants, university students and pupils, who took it on on themselves to represent the Polish claim to Lwów. The Polish military forces in Lwów had no unified command structure and represented a variety of political affiliations, and the rapid Ukrainian offensive took them by surprise. Many Ukrainians wanted to rid themselves of the hated Polish dominance and hound all Poles out of public positions. The situation deteriorated, and there were attacks against civilians, looting and increasingly violent battles. Anyone on either side hoping to achieve a sensible compromise was fighting a losing battle, and all attempts at negotiation failed. The archbishops of Poland and Ukraine called for a ceasefire, which the troops eventually complied with. Socialist Poles advocating an independent Ukraine volunteered to join in fighting with the Polish side.[9]

Once the Polish troops had occupied Lwów, they inflicted a pogrom on the Jewish inhabitants. Parts of the Jewish defence militias had taken sides with the Ukrainians, and this inflamed antisemitic tendencies within the Polish population and fanned the pogrom's flames.

Roman Dmowski was following all these events from Paris and laying plans to take over the government with the help of the political majority he commanded

in the country. In this, he would be assisted by the popularity of the world-famous pianist and composer Ignacy Paderewski (1860-1941), whom he sent from Paris to Poland in December 1918. Paderewski arrived in Poznań on 26 December to a storm of enthusiasm, accompanied by British liaison officers. The National Democrats were the predominant party in Poznań. An insurrection gave impetus to attempts to ensure a Polish takeover of the administration of the city and of the whole province, which had previously been progressing at a snail's pace.

Paderewski's arrival in Warsaw exposed which of the two rivals had the more realistic one Dmowski's hopes were dashed by the power of Paderewski's character. The pianist was not a political animal; he was keen to serve his homeland through his music and his committment to humanitarian causes. His appointment to the Paris Committee had not bound him to the ideological position of Dmowski and the National Democrats. In spite of the differences between the 'Lithuanian' and the cosmopolitan artist, Paderewski and Piłsudski soon developed a relationship of respect and indeed friendship.

At the start of January 1919, Warsaw officers sympathetic to the National Democrats planned a putsch to overthrow Piłsudski. Paderewski and, later, Dmowski would not be involved in any government affairs. The dilettante putsch attempt failed, and Piłsudski turned the tables on the conspirators. He exposed those who had initiated the so-called 'Theatre Putsch' as ridiculous, but did not impose draconian punishment. Only a new form of compromise would be able

Fig. 4: Provisorial map of the Ukrainian People's Republic, 1919.

to save the increasingly weakened republic and rescue the Polish negotiating position in Paris, where the peace negotiations were about to open formally. Piłsudski persuaded Paderewski to take on the role of prime minister and to lead a coalition government that included Socialists, National Democrats, Conservatives and representatives of the various farmers' associations. Many government positions were allocated to independents. This meant that political extremists on either wing could be held in check.

Paderewski agreed to take on the position, shuttled between Paris and Warsaw and remained one of Poland's most important representatives in the Paris discussions. Dmowski, in Paris, was the official leader of the Polish negotiating delegation. Piłsudski did his best to ensure that his most highly trusted representatives were also present to check the influence of the National Democrats. In Warsaw, he was leading the establishment of the state; with his close advisers, he worked to set up an army that could resist the Soviet Russian threat, staging the 'Wonder of the Vistula' in August 1920. Painstaking work was required of the Polish representatives in Paris to resolve or overcome internal differences of opinion on the boundaries of Poland, on relations with neighbours to the east and on visions of a future Poland.

There was no lack of voices at the Paris negotiating tables casting doubts on Poland's right to exist and the Polish Republic's chances of survival. Speaking for France, Georges Clemenceau (1841-1929) expressed the highest respect for Poland and the hope that its restoration would make amends for one of the greatest crimes in history. President Woodrow Wilson (1856-1924) made a generous promise to Poland in his Fourteen Points. The British, however, and the assembled advisers and specialists thought very differently. It was possible to construe Wilson's call for a unified, independent and self-governing Poland in a variety of ways.

The British expert on Polish affairs, Lewis Namier (1888-1960), who was himself of Polish–Jewish extraction, called for a campaign against Dmowski and his adherents. He may well have had a point, given the antisemitic attitudes of many National Democrats and of Dmowski himself. Because of his fear of Polish antisemitism, he believed that Poland should exist only as a subsidiary state, but this was not a realistic position. He underestimated the strength of republican feeling among socialist and Liberal forces in the reborn Poland. Nationalism, xenophobia and antisemitism were alien to these forces and to their leader, Piłsudski.

The Polish question became one of the most complicated issues tackled during the protracted negotiations, and it occupied committees and sub-committees until well beyond the summer of 1919.

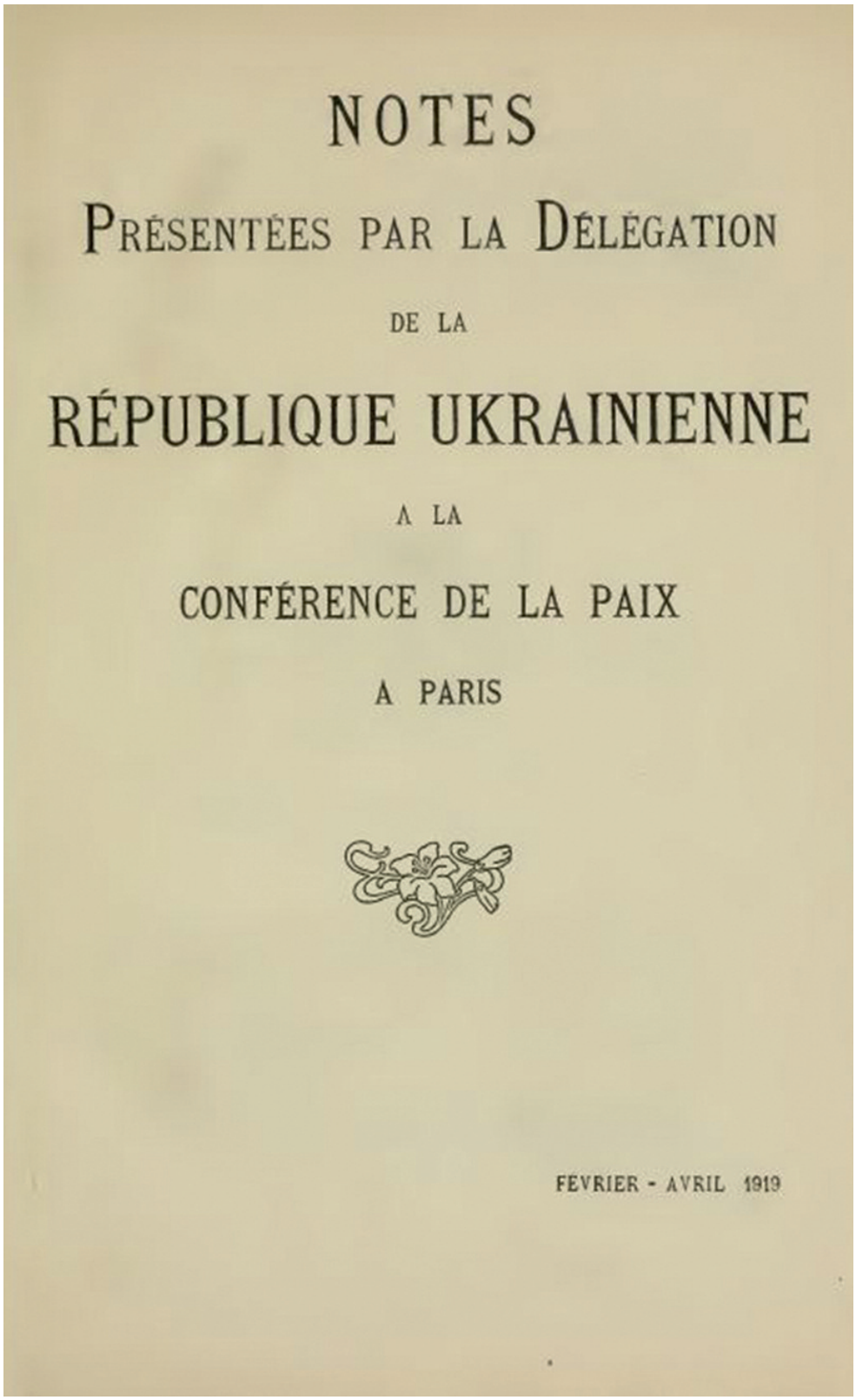
The Failure of the Forces for Ukrainian Independence

The representatives of the Ukrainian independence movement sitting around the Paris negotiating tables were divided into various groups and strands, and they did not have the status of an official delegation. The proposal in the 1917 Treaty of Brest Litowsk for an independent Ukrainian state existed only on paper. It had arisen from the interests of Germany as a participant in the war, and from the negotiating skill of the Bolsheviks. When the first Bolshevik delegation refused to accept the German conditions for a ceasefire and peace, the German military machine was set in motion.

Under the name 'Operation Faustschlag', German troops occupied nearly all Ukrainian territories and other parts of the Baltic region. Lenin decided that he would, for the time being, put up with the presence of German troops on Ukrainian soil, and use the peace accord as a badly needed breathing space.

He assumed that the German Spring offensive to the West was doomed to failure, and that the war would end in Germany's defeat. His comrades were keen to begin a life-and-death struggle, but he persuaded them that the setback would only be temporary. He played for time, demonstrating yet again his tactical skill. In later trading negotiations, he made it clear to his comrades that he wanted to hang the capitalists with the rope they were selling him.

In Ukraine, the military independence forces of the Central Council were caught between Soviet Ukrainian military units, the armies of the White Generals and the German troops, and were wiped out. The Ukrainians in Paris were representing an entity that could barely be described as an actual state, and and they were ignored and dismissed to an even greater extent than were the Poles.[10]


NOTES

PRÉSENTÉES PAR LA DÉLÉGATION

DE LA

RÉPUBLIQUE UKRAINIENNE

A LA

CONFÉRENCE DE LA PAIX

A PARIS

FEVRIER - AVRIL 1919

Fig. 5: Diplomatic notes of the Ukrainian delegation to the Paris Peace Conference from February to April 1919.

When not in an official capacity, the British lead negotiator, Lloyd George, behaved with forthright brutality. He had only once, he asserted, met a Ukrainian, and he was not certain that he ever again wanted to meet another. The English prime minister's complete lack of knowledge of anything relating to East-Central Europe was clear for all to see.

It was Lloyd George also who repeatedly sought to frustrate attempts to build up a Polish army and strengthen Polish defences. He was sympathetic to the Bolshevik Soviet social experiment and hoped that if the West were accepting of it and keen to build trading relationships they would be able to foster liberalisation there.

In matters concerning the effective independence of Ukraine, the attitudes of the allies' leading representatives were based on ignorance, prejudice and a fixedly favourable view of the developments in Soviet Russia.

Independence movements had been operating in Ukraine's Russian and Habsburg-owned territories since the second half of the 19th century, striving for national autonomy and self-reliance and adopting a variety of social and political positions. Members of these movements made an initial attempt to create an autonomous state during and after the First World War, and the Ukraine's independence was declared in January 1918. Socialists, monarchists and conservatives struggled for dominance within the structures of the nascent Ukrainian state, and a state-building process in West Ukraine subsequently posed a constant threat to the central Ukrainian government.

Both German military forces and Russian Bolsheviks sought to instrumentalise the Ukrainian independence forces for their own ends. Lenin's promise of an independent Ukraine, which lasted only until the end of the civil war, served to consolidate his own efforts to gain power. His concept of a 'red' Greater Russia, created under his own leadership, would tolerate only a Soviet Ukraine and, as a satellite state, a territorially diminished Soviet Poland. Ultimately, the Paris negotiations settled the fate of Ukraine far less definitively than they did the future of the Polish Republic. This was due in part to the failure of the Polish–Ukrainian Federation plan, which was linked with the names of Piłsudski and Symon Petljura (1879-1926), and to an even greater extent to the success of the Soviet experiment, which the Western Allies increasingly came to accept.[11]

Fig. 6: The Ukrainian politician Symon Petljura, President of the Ukrainian People's Republic 1918-1921.

As a result of the negotiations in Riga, which lasted until the spring of 1923, Ukraine was divided into two: a pseudo-state, Soviet Ukraine, and West Ukraine, which was incorporated into the Polish Republic. It was not until decades after the end of the Second World War that Ukraine would become a truly independent state. Moreover, its Russian neighbour continues to call its sovereignty into question to this day

Endnotes

1. Margaret Mac Millan, Die Friedensmacher: Wie der Versailler Vertrag die Welt veränderte (Berlin: Propyläen, 2015), 283ff.
2. ND – Narodowa Demokracja.
3. Andrzej Nowak, Polska i trzy Rosje, Studium polityki wschodniej Józefa Piłsudskiego (do kwietnia 1920 roku) (Kraków: Arcana, 2001), 421; Grzegorz Krzywiec, Szowinizm po polsku. Przypadek Romana Dmowskiego (1886-1905) (Warsaw: Neriton, 2009), 191.
4. PPS – Polska Partia Socjalistyczna.
5. Jan Józef Lipski, Dwie ojczyzny – dwa patriotyzmie. Uwagi o megalomanii narodowej i ksenophobii Polaków (Warsaw: cdn, 1982), 17ff.; Wolfgang Templin, Der Kampf um Polen. Die abenteuerliche Geschichte der Zweiten Polnischen Republik (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2018).
6. Harry Graf Kessler, Tagebücher 1918-1937 (Frankfurt/Main: Insel Taschenbuch, 1995).
7. POW – Polska Organizacja Wojskowa.
8. Andrzej Garlicki, Józef Piłsudski. 1867-1935 (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Znak, 2008); Bohdan Urbankowski, Józef Piłsudski. Marzyciel i Strateg (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Sysk i S-ka, 2014), 164.
9. Best-known among the Polish socialists who dedicated their programmatic writings before 1918 and their political activities to campaigning for the Ukraine's independence and against the National Democrats' Ukraine policies were Tadeusz Hołówko, Henryk Józefski, Ignacy Daszynski and Leon Wasilewski. Mirosław Boruta, Wolni z wolnymi. Równi z równimi. Polska i Polacy o niepodległości wschodnich sąsiadów Rszeczpospolitej (Kraków: Arcana, 2002), 45.
10. Frank Golczewski, Deutsche und Ukrainer 1914-1939 (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2010).
11. Jan Pisuliński, Nie tylko Petljura, Kwestia ukraińska w polskiej w polskiej polityce zagranicznej w latach 1918-1923 (Toruń: Wydawnictwo naukowe UMK, 2013), 323.